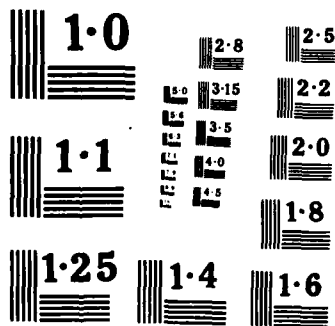


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ESCALATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND PERSIAN GULF

Francis Fukuyama

September 1984

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## ESCALATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND PERSIAN GULF<sup>1</sup>

Francis Fukuyama  
The Rand Corporation

### INTRODUCTION

In many ways the Middle East/Persian Gulf region is one of the most likely places in which a U.S.-Soviet conflict could ultimately escalate into nuclear war. The combination of high mutual superpower stakes in the region, endemic political instability among its states, and the presence of strong military forces in close proximity guarantees that crises in the Middle East/Persian Gulf will continue to have the potential to trigger direct U.S.-Soviet military conflict and consequently the use of nuclear weapons. Within the region, which stretches from Morocco to Pakistan, there is a wide variety of local conflicts and correspondingly many ways in which the superpowers could conceivably be drawn into war. Of these regional conflicts, two stand out as serious enough to raise the possibility of nuclear war between the superpowers: a possible Soviet invasion of Iran and other parts of the Persian Gulf, and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

A superpower war over the Middle East/Persian Gulf is more than an abstract possibility, since this region has consistently been a major focal point for confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union throughout the postwar period. One of the first major crises of the cold war developed over the Soviet refusal to withdraw its forces from northern Iran in 1946. The United States put its strategic forces on higher states of alert in response to Soviet actions during the 1958 Lebanese-Iraqi crisis and at the end of the October 1973 Arab-Israeli

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was prepared in connection with the project on "Avoiding Nuclear War" at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, and will appear as a chapter in a forthcoming book of the same title, edited by Graham Allison, Albert Carnesale, and Joseph Nye. Both the structure and content of this paper reflect the many useful comments from other participants in the project.

War. In addition, the United States sent Marine contingents to Lebanon in 1958 and 1982, and deployed naval task forces to the eastern Mediterranean in response to wars in 1956, 1967, 1973, and 1982.

The Soviet Union has threatened to intervene with its own combat forces in Middle Eastern crises on six occasions. Three times, all during the Khrushchev era, the Soviets threatened the use of nuclear weapons: in connection with the Suez crisis of 1956, the Syrian-Turkish crisis of 1957, and the Lebanese-Iraqi crisis of 1958. In the first of these conflicts Soviet Premier Bulganin wrote to British Prime Minister Eden:

In what situation would Britain find herself if she were attacked by stronger states, possessing all types of modern destructive weapons? And such countries could, at the present time, refrain from sending naval or air forces to the shores of Britain and use other means--for instance, rocket weapons...

In later years, Moscow dispatched twenty thousand air defense troops and other advisors to Egypt during the 1970 War of Attrition, deployed another six thousand to Syria in the wake of the 1982 Lebanon War, moved warships into the theater in response to a variety of other crises, and intervened in Afghanistan in 1979 with combat forces numbering over one hundred thousand. Perhaps no single Middle East crisis has been as severe as those surrounding Cuba and Berlin, but the superpowers have collectively threatened and actually used force more often here than anywhere else.

Although the Soviets have not threatened the use of nuclear weapons in the Middle East since the late 1950s, the likelihood of a nuclear war arising from this region has probably increased in the succeeding years. During the crises of the 1950s, for all the intensity of Soviet rhetoric, the Soviet Union never came close to intervening with either conventional or nuclear weapons; all of its threats were in fact bluffs.<sup>2</sup> The United States at that time enjoyed a superiority in both strategic and conventional forces, and had strong treaty commitments to several important states in the region. In the 1980s, by contrast, the

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<sup>2</sup> See my article "Nuclear Shadowboxing: Soviet Intervention Threats in the Middle East," *Orbis*, Fall 1981.

Soviets speak more softly but carry a bigger stick: not only has the United States lost its margin of nuclear superiority, but Moscow's relative ability to project force into the region has increased. At the same time, the U.S. stake in the Persian Gulf has increased, as was generally recognized after OPEC demonstrated the vulnerability of Western economies to oil supply disruptions in the early 1970s.

Despite the real risks in this region, it may be counterproductive to overemphasize the danger of superpower war. In the past, both sides have managed to control risks fairly effectively and have never come close to direct conflict<sup>3</sup>. This result has been achieved partly through negotiated and cooperative measures, but primarily through a sort of mutual deterrence that extends down through the level of conventional forces. Thus the goal of lowering the risk of war has been consonant with U.S. policies to deter Soviet and other threats to its interests in the Middle East, which in the short run often involve assuming certain risks of confrontation and require active preparations for war. In any event, while the consequences of nuclear war would be catastrophic, the probability of its arising out of any particular crisis in the region is extremely low; the imperative of lowering the risk of nuclear war must be balanced against the multiplicity of other U.S. foreign policy interests.

This chapter will try to come to an understanding of how nuclear war could arise in the Middle East/Persian Gulf region, drawing largely on historical precedents, and on this basis look more closely at possible means of reducing the risks of war.

## FACTORS AFFECTING THE PROBABILITY OF NUCLEAR WAR

To understand how a crisis in the Middle East/Persian Gulf might escalate to nuclear war, and to evaluate possible actions to limit this risk, it is necessary to analyze the deep, intermediate, and precipitating causes of war.

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<sup>3</sup> The well-known Brezhnev letter of October 25, 1973, which provoked a U.S. nuclear alert and caused such concern over the prospect of superpower conflict, was in fact a proposal for a joint U.S.-Soviet peacekeeping force that would enforce the ceasefire previously agreed to by both sides and prevent destruction of the Egyptian Third Army.

### **Deep Causes**

The most important deep cause of nuclear war is exogenous to the Middle East/Persian Gulf, and has to do with the long-term rivalry that has existed between the United States and the Soviet Union. While that rivalry originated primarily from conflict over the division of postwar Europe, it quickly spread to Asia and various parts of the third world, including the Middle East. Its roots include ideological, geographical, economic, cultural, and historical factors, and it is likely to persist indefinitely. Since superpower conflict in any given region is largely a symptom of the broader rivalry, one cannot hope to ameliorate the deep causes of war by any actions specific to a particular theater.

A second deep cause is the endemic political instability of the Middle East, which invites superpower intervention. Long-standing interstate conflicts like the Arab-Israeli confrontation and the rivalry between Iran and Iraq are accompanied by a host of intrastate conflicts resulting from ethnic, class, sectarian, and ideological disputes. While some of these conflicts can be ameliorated or even solved as a matter of policy, most have deep-seated historical and cultural roots and will not disappear within the time frame of this study.

### **Intermediate Causes**

The intermediate causes of war have to do with the way in which the larger U.S.-Soviet rivalry is played out in a specific regional context.

A nation's willingness to risk war depends on the absolute value of the interests it feels are threatened by another power. Nations by and large do not go to war unless substantial interests are at stake, and the stakes must be particularly high to justify assuming the risks of nuclear war. The United States and the Soviet Union both have interests in the Middle East/Persian Gulf that are potentially strong enough that the use of nuclear weapons might be considered, but these interests differ according to the specific subregion and conflict in question. America's stakes in Persian Gulf oil, in the survival of Israel, and in the western Sahara, for example, are very different. Thus our analysis begins by examining the hierarchy of interests of the superpowers as they are affected by developments in this region.



Wars are much less likely to arise where superpower stakes are asymmetrical than where they are both strong and evenly balanced. For instance, while the United States may have a strong interest in Polish independence and human rights, it is dwarfed by the Soviet Union's stake in preserving Poland as a security buffer. Consequently Washington has never been willing to contemplate a military challenge to Soviet hegemony over Poland throughout the postwar period. By contrast, the severity of the Berlin crises of the late 1950s and early 1960s reflected the fact that *both* superpowers had high stakes in the future of that city and of Germany more broadly.

The Middle East/Persian Gulf presents special dangers because the U.S. and Soviet stakes are both strong in absolute terms and relatively evenly balanced. I will argue later that the United States has had and will continue to have the larger stake in this region overall, and that the Soviets have generally respected this fact. Nevertheless, the frequency of crisis and confrontation in the Middle East is largely a product of the mutual and conflicting interests of the two superpowers. Again, the balance of relative stakes varies among subregions and needs to be evaluated in greater detail.

To avoid the sorts of challenges to fundamental interests that are likely to lead to war, the superpowers must be able to *perceive and correctly evaluate* each other's underlying stake. The most dangerous situation arises when one superpower takes an action that it believes will not provoke a response on the other side, but which in fact threatens what the other side considers a vital interest. The correct perception and evaluation of stakes is much more difficult in the Middle East/Persian Gulf than in Europe because the nature of these interests has changed over time and is constantly influenced by local political developments whose strategic significance is often hard to interpret. For example, *both* the United States and the Soviet Union regarded the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war as a potential avenue for the expansion of the other's influence. The lines dividing East and West in the center of Europe have been clearly drawn for nearly forty years; in the Middle East/Persian Gulf, major countries like Egypt and Iran have been able to switch sides or hover precariously between the superpowers with highly

ambiguous effects for their net interests. One can only imagine the consequences for European security had West Germany early on broken away from NATO and tried to establish a foreign policy somewhere between the two blocs.

*THE UNITED STATES.* The United States has a major stake in seeing that the states of the Middle East, beginning with Iran, do not fall under Soviet influence or control. President Carter thought this interest strong enough to proclaim that "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America. And such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."<sup>4</sup> It is important to keep in mind, however, that Carter was not the first U.S. President to proclaim the Persian Gulf (or at least parts of it) a vital national interest, nor has the American stake in the Gulf been limited to the familiar question of access to oil.

The United States in some sense inherited its interest in Persian Gulf security from the British, who throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries repeatedly blocked Russian attempts to expand southward. The British believed that the area was vital to imperial communications, particularly with India, and that its control by another great power would be highly dangerous to the overall European balance of power<sup>5</sup>.

This same logic underlay U.S. policy as it filled the vacuum left by the British in the late '40s and made repeated attempts to organize the states of the so-called Northern Tier (Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan) into a series of anti-Communist alliances, including the Middle East Defence Organization in 1951, the Baghdad Pact in 1955, and subsequently the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). Access to Persian Gulf oil was only one of several considerations. Until the late 1950s the U.S. needed access to the Northern Tier to support its strategic deterrent, which at the time relied heavily on intermediate range

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<sup>4</sup> The so-called Carter Doctrine was enunciated in President Carter's State of the Union Message on January 20, 1980.

<sup>5</sup> British attempts to contain Russian expansion southward ultimately led to a formal division of Iran into spheres of influence in the Anglo-Russian Entente of 1907.

systems like B-47 bombers and intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBMs), and sought to create a series of interlocking defensive pacts around the periphery of the Soviet Union. U.S. interest in the region was reflected in the Eisenhower Doctrine, first enunciated in January 1957, which declared that in the general area of the Middle East, "the United States is prepared to use armed forces to assist any nation or group of nations requesting assistance against armed aggression from any country controlled by international communism."

This Eisenhower-era concern with the security of the Northern Tier and other parts of the Middle East/Persian Gulf diminished somewhat with the collapse of the Baghdad Pact in 1958 and the introduction of intercontinental nuclear delivery systems, which made it unnecessary to maintain bases on the periphery of the Soviet Union. The general American interest in Persian Gulf security took on a more specific and vital focus during the 1970s, as access to oil became an issue. In 1977, just before the Iranian Revolution, Western Europe imported 406 million metric tons of oil from the Persian Gulf, which constituted 65 percent of its total oil consumption and 35 percent of its overall energy consumption.<sup>6</sup>

The Western economies' vulnerability to oil supply disruptions has diminished considerably since that time as a result of market forces and deliberate government policies to seek alternative energy sources. The United States, moreover, receives a much smaller percentage of its total oil consumption from the Persian Gulf than does Western Europe or Japan. Nonetheless, there remains a general consensus among U.S. policy-makers that access to Gulf oil constituted a vital American interest, for several reasons. First, because the world oil market is highly integrated and oil is a fungible commodity, any major shortfall in Persian Gulf oil would mean higher prices for American consumers. prices. Second, even if Western European and American interests in Gulf oil could be separated, Soviet control of the Gulf could have disastrous political consequences if the Soviet Union tried to split the Western alliance system, including U.S. ties with Japan. Successful Arab

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<sup>6</sup> Figures quoted in Albert Wohlstetter, "Half-Wars and Half-Policies" in W. Scott Thompson (ed.), *From Weakness to Strength* (Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1980), pp. 134-135.

efforts to politicize the oil trade with western Europe over the Palestinian issue illustrate the kind of leverage that might accrue to the Soviet Union if it gained direct or indirect control over a substantial portion of the Persian Gulf's oil resources.

The U.S. has a highly complex stake in Israel. Because of concerns about Arab reactions, successive American administrations have denied Israel the protection of formal treaty commitments of the sort extended to the NATO allies, Japan, and Korea. Nevertheless, it is clear from its actions and the statements of its leaders that the United States is deeply committed to the survival of Israel. The U.S. stake is based in part on ideological solidarity with a fellow liberal democracy, a history of past commitment and invested prestige, and an emotional element whose strength is difficult to measure exactly but is undeniably present. Israel has also served as an important *de facto* strategic asset because of its military predominance in the region and its reliable long-term alignment with the West. At the same time, Israel has also been a strategic liability to the United States, since it serves as a constant irritant in U.S. relations with the Arabs.<sup>7</sup>

*The Soviet Union.* Imperial Russia and subsequently the Soviet Union have had strong and long-standing interests in parts of the Persian Gulf; much of Russia's southward expansion in the Caucasus and Turkestan during the nineteenth century came at the expense of the Persian Empire, and Russian troops have occupied parts of present-day Iran twice in this century. Soviet interests in this region can be divided into three categories. The first concerns defense of the nation's southern borders. Since World War II Soviet statements have referred repeatedly to Moscow's concerns with developments "in an area adjacent to the southern borders of the USSR." During the Revolution and Civil War,

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<sup>7</sup> Israel's net strategic value to the United States is a complicated question beyond the scope of this paper. My own view is that the unwillingness of pro-Western Arab states to cooperate with the U.S. on issues like base access is due to a wide variety of historical, cultural, and political factors, of which the Palestinian issue is just one. Even if Israel were to disappear tomorrow the conservative states in the region would still be very reluctant to collaborate with the United States; indeed, Israel provides a convenient excuse for not doing what most Arab states would not be inclined to do in any case.

White forces under General Denikin attacked the fledgling Soviet state from this direction, and the Soviets were quite concerned by the deployment of strategic systems in the Northern Tier by the United States in the 1950s. These acute defensive concerns have probably diminished considerably with the collapse of the Baghdad Pact and the progressive weakening and final demise of CENTO by the late 1970s. Currently, Soviet defensive interests in this region are more likely to reflect general political concerns over developments in a weak and politically unstable border region, developments that could conceivably have spillover effects in the Soviet Union itself. Many of the region's ethnic groups, most notably the Azeri Turks in northern Iran, also inhabit the Soviet Union, and the Soviet leadership may have vague fears that the religious and nationalist currents of the Middle East/Persian Gulf will find a sympathetic echo in the Soviet Union itself.

The second Soviet interest in the Gulf revolves around strategic communications. Russia has long faced the problem of being "bottled up"; for access to the outside world, it must pass through choke points often under the control of hostile powers. The 1941 Soviet General Staff *Command Study* of Iran quotes Stalin in this regard:

The great importance of the Caucasus for the Revolution is not to be seen in its being a source of raw material, fuels, and food but rather its position between Europe and Asia and especially between Russia and Turkey and the strategic crossroads which pass through it... In the final analysis, that is what it is all about: Who will own the oil fields and the most important roads leading to the interior of Asia?<sup>8</sup>

This concern over strategic communications is broader than the frequently noted "drive for warm water ports;" Moscow has an interest in air and land access as well, and in protection of the lines of communication running between the European and Far Eastern parts of

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<sup>8</sup> Gerold Guensberg (trans.), *Soviet Command Study of Iran (Moscow 1941): Draft Translation and Brief Analysis* (Arlington, VA: SRI International, 1980), p. 1 (hereafter referred to as *Soviet Command Study*). This study, prepared by the Soviet General Staff in early 1941, presents a plan for the invasion of Iran quite similar to the one that was actually carried out in August of that year. It was subsequently captured by the Germans during their invasion of the Caucasus, and then by the Americans when they occupied Berlin in 1945.

Russia through the Indian Ocean, particularly in the event of a war with China.

The third area of Soviet interest lies in oil and other natural resources. This interest is not tied directly to the Soviet Union's energy requirements--the USSR has not been and is not likely to be a large importer of Persian Gulf oil or natural gas--but rather to the value of these natural resources per se. Soviet control or influence over these resources would constitute a massive transfer of wealth, giving Moscow a significant source of leverage over the Western alliance as a whole. We have direct evidence that Soviet leaders recognize the strategic value of Persian Gulf oil to the global balance of power; the 1941 Soviet Command Study, for example, notes oil-producing areas in Iran and Iraq as significant strategic objectives.<sup>9</sup>

The Soviet stake in its Arab clients is similarly complex. Moscow originally became involved in the Arab heartland in 1955 as a means of acquiring a bargaining card to use in trade for the neutralization of the Norther Tier. Over the years relative priorities changed, and countries like Egypt and Syria took on an inherent importance as centerpieces of Moscow's effort to build relationships in the third world. In the 1960s these countries also served a specific military objective as well by supporting the deployment of the Soviet Fifth Eskadra in the Mediterranean and occasional Indian Ocean task forces. While Moscow's current stake in Syria is not as high as its former stake in Egypt at its peak in 1970-73, Damascus remains its principal Arab client and its primary source of influence in the crucial eastern Mediterranean theater, the beneficiary of thirty years and billions of dollars worth of military and economic support.

The Soviet Union has consistently used great caution in directly challenging U.S. interests in the Middle East/Persian Gulf and has generally backed away at the prospect of a direct military clash with the United States, such as occurred during the Azerbaijan crisis of 1946 or the crisis over Iraq in 1958. The Soviets tolerated close military ties between the United States and Iran under the Shah, in spite of the 1921 Soviet-Iranian Treaty giving Russia the right to introduce troops into Iran in response to a third-party threat originating there. In the

<sup>9</sup> See *Soviet Command Study*, p. 127.

The Israeli government, moreover, seems to be making a deliberate effort to humiliate the Soviets. With the evident desire to teach the Soviets to stay out of the Middle East and to demonstrate Soviet lack of conventional options, the Israeli military sinks Soviet ships in port, shoots down large numbers of Soviet-piloted interceptors, destroys Soviet transport aircraft, and goes so far as to sink a Soviet cruiser near the Syrian coast.

The desperate Syrian government appeals for massive Soviet help, in particular for the transfer of nuclear weapons that can be mounted on its recently acquired SS-21 and SS-22 missiles. The Soviets find that they have no good options for conventional intervention: airborne forces that could be deployed in the theater lack the heavy equipment to go up against Israeli armor; naval forces would be ineffective in altering the emerging status quo on the ground; and air force units deployed into Syria have been destroyed almost as soon as they arrived. The Soviets therefore see no alternative but to transfer several small-yield nuclear warheads to their forces in Syria, which then launches several nuclear-armed SS-21s into Israel.

Israel is in shock. A day earlier it was in a position of complete military predominance; now it has sustained civilian casualties representing a significant percentage of its total population. Fearing that the Syrians have not used up their supply of nuclear warheads, Israel launches a retaliatory nuclear strike against major population targets in Syria and Iraq, and against Soviet military forces (primarily naval surface combatants) deployed in the region.

Hereafter, the Case B scenario could develop much as in Case A, with the Soviets mistaking U.S. and Israeli nuclear attacks, worldwide alerts, and so on.

## **ACTIONS TO REDUCE THE PROBABILITY OF NUCLEAR WAR**

The scenarios in the previous section provide a useful point of departure for discussion of actions to lower the risk of nuclear war, since they pointss to the specific ways in which conflicts can escalate, and therefore ways in which the escalation process can be broken. Several initial observations are in order.

the U.S. Sixth Fleet. The Soviet military, which for a long time suspected that Israel was acting as a U.S. proxy in its attacks on Soviet forces, believes that the United States and not Israel was responsible for the last series of attacks; in particular, Soviet intelligence does not believe Israel possesses a delivery system capable of reaching the Ukraine. The Soviet Union has by now suffered hundreds of thousands of casualties from the nuclear strikes and feels that it has no choice but to retaliate against the ultimate source of the aggression. Selective nuclear strikes with SS-20 missiles are ordered against U.S. overseas bases, facilities, and naval forces, including the Sixth Fleet carrier battle groups.

Thereafter, events follow the course outlined in Scenario I, with both the United States and Soviet Union escalating their use of nuclear weapons up to the point of homeland strikes.

*CASE B: ISRAEL WINS.* As a result of the resumption of cross-border terrorist attacks into northern Israel with the acquiescence of Syria, a hard-line Israeli government decides to "go to the source" once and for all and destroy the radical Arab government in Damascus. As Case A, the Soviets have substantially increased their support for Syria by manning Syrian ground-based air defenses and interceptors and providing other types of ground forces to perform garrison duty. They have, moreover, provided the Syrians with a whole new generation of tactical missiles minus their nuclear warheads; some in Israel believe that the warheads themselves have been covertly transferred.

The war begins with a major Israeli air force attack on Syrian air defenses, which kill many Soviet soldiers. Israeli armored forces quickly outflank Syrian defenses on the Golan Heights, prompting the Soviet government to issue a warning that it will not stand idly by if Israel does not adhere to the UN-mandated ceasefire passed with U.S. approval on the first day of the war. Israel disregards the Soviet warning altogether and within two or three days the Israeli Defense Forces have already surrounded and bypassed Damascus, pursuing the fleeing Syrian government northward. It quickly becomes clear that Israeli aims are much more ambitious than originally believed.



belligerents, as well as on major targets of military value including nuclear power facilities, ports, and airfields. Jerusalem announces that its nuclear stockpile is an order of magnitude larger than current intelligence estimates and that it has ballistic missile delivery vehicles capable of striking the most distant target. It warns the Arabs, in the meantime, to withdraw or face further retribution.

The Arabs are stunned by this development, which has caused more than one hundred thousand deaths. They believe that Israel has exhausted its stockpile of nuclear weapons, however. Instead of withdrawing, they appeal to the Soviet Union either to provide them with nuclear weapons or to retaliate against Israel directly.

The Israeli strike has caused thousands of casualties among Soviet forces; to preserve its own prestige and credibility Moscow feels it must take some action against Israel in response. The United States, moreover, was deeply shocked by the Israeli use of nuclear weapons and the large numbers of civilian casualties it caused, and the Soviets believe they can take advantage of this wedge between the United States and Israel to avoid direct confrontation with Washington. Now that Israeli ground forces have been seriously weakened, the Soviets send several divisions of airborne troops to shore up Arab forces in Israel and administer the final coup de grace. In addition, there is evidence of Soviet efforts to transfer nuclear weapons to Syria.

The Israeli government, believing that this may be Israel's last act as a state, orders another even larger nuclear strike against the principal population centers of the Arab belligerents, Soviet ground forces deploying into the area, Soviet naval units in the Mediterranean and Persian Gulf, and certain population targets in the southern Ukraine itself. This last act does not serve any clearcut military or political purpose, but is undertaken as an act of pure revenge for Soviet support for the Arabs.

The final Israeli nuclear strike coincides with a belated U.S. effort to intervene militarily on Israel's behalf, involving higher alert levels for U.S. forces worldwide, including strategic nuclear forces, deployment of airborne units from the continental United States to the Eastern Mediterranean, increased resupply and intelligence activities, and a quarantining of the Syrian and Israeli coastlines by

vehicle. Second, the Soviet Union has dramatically increased its military involvement in both Syria and Iraq, with Soviet officers serving in combat units, Soviet troops manning ground-based air defenses and interceptors, and other Soviet ground forces performing garrison duties in rear areas. In addition, a large Soviet naval task force deploys to the eastern Mediterranean at the outset of the war. Finally, the United States and Israel are at a low point in their relationship, with U.S. economic and military assistance to Israel temporarily suspended pending U.S. efforts to reverse the recent Israeli decision to annex the West Bank.

Because of the support from Soviet forces and qualitative improvements in the Arab militaries and that of Israel, the Northern Front allies do much better than expected, inflicting heavy casualties on Israeli forces on the Golan Heights. Successful attacks on reserve mobilization centers and heavy casualties from the conventional bombing of major Israeli cities have created more hysteria in Israel than in past wars, and an apocalyptic sense that this may be the final showdown with the state's opponents. There is also considerable anger at the Soviets for playing so direct a role, and an increasing resentment of the United States for not doing enough. There is, in fact, a growing feeling in the Israeli leadership that the war was brought on by the American aid freeze, and that Israel may have to go it alone on this occasion.

Suddenly, Jordanian and Iraqi forces break through into pre-1967 Israel and begin advancing rapidly into the narrow interior of the country. The Arabs, encouraged by their unexpected success, expand their political objectives to the reconquest of as much of Palestine as possible. There is a sudden sense of panic in Israel; Israeli ground forces become demoralized and begin collapsing suddenly. As the impending Arab victory becomes clearer, other Arab states like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which had been sitting on the fence, begin to join in the battle with their sophisticated American weapons.

The government in Jerusalem, despairing of American help, decides to take matters into its own hands. After appealing for a cease-fire and warning of possible nuclear use, the Israeli air force drops several medium-yield nuclear bombs on secondary cities of the main Arab

entirely misinterpret British and French efforts to separate their nuclear forces from U.S. operations, seeing them as preparations for joint strikes with the United States. The Soviets do not view American actions as a response to their initial invasion of Iran and the North Korean invasion of South Korea, but rather as a calculated attempt to inflict damage on the Soviet Union and take advantage of the situation created by the current crisis. Some members of the Soviet leadership have a more sinister interpretation of U.S. behavior, believing that higher U.S. alert rates are a preparation for a massive American nuclear strike. The military argues that the United States cannot be permitted to whittle away at their forces and those of allies like North Korea; that according to doctrine a nuclear war once begun cannot be kept limited, and that any advantages of preemption will be lost if American forces proceed to yet higher alert rates. Hence the Soviets themselves launch a massive countermilitary strike against U.S. overseas bases, and several selected important targets in the continental United States. A countermilitary strike, unlike the U.S. concept of a counterforce strike, does not deliberately seek to avoid hitting civilian targets and minimizing collateral damage; hence while some Soviet nuclear weapons hit isolated military installations like Shemya Air Force Base in the Aleutians, others hit population centers like the ports of Bremerton, Washington, and San Diego, California. The United States then feels compelled to respond in kind.

## **Scenario 2: Escalation of an Arab-Israeli Conflict**

*CASE A: ISRAEL LOSES.* Secret negotiations between Syria, Iraq, and Jordan have produced a Northern Front coalition that launches a massive surprise attack on Israel, with the initially limited goal of seizing and holding Israeli-occupied territory as a means of increasing its bargaining leverage. As in 1973, the Arabs have managed to achieve nearly total strategic surprise. There are three important differences from 1973, however. First, the Arabs have acquired equipment and trained manpower to launch a series of conventional strikes into the interior of Israel, including SS-21 and SS-22 missiles. The Israelis fear, but are not certain that the Syrians and/or Iraqis have covertly developed some nuclear device, for which they clearly have a delivery

that a general naval war has begun, fighting between U.S. and Soviet combatants erupts and rapidly expands eastward from the Gulf along the major sea lanes all the way back to Northeast Asia, resulting in the destruction of a large part of the Soviet Pacific fleet.

The U.S. strike against airbases in the Soviet Union is militarily effective and produces heavy civilian casualties in nearby towns. The Soviets are surprised by the Turks' action and feel that they have to be taught a lesson. Responding in kind to the American attack, the Soviets strike the bases from which the U.S. aircraft originated with small yield nuclear weapons, as well as a few main operating bases in western Turkey for good measure.

Now there has been a direct Soviet nuclear attack on a NATO country. Instead of standing firmly behind Turkey, the major Western European governments, following the lead of their publics, tend to blame the United States for the initial escalation to nuclear weapons and draw the lesson that they will suffer the same fate as Turkey unless they disassociate themselves from the United States. Britain and France withdraw their independent nuclear deterrents from any semblance of joint NATO planning or control and put them on a higher state of alert in case they have to be used unilaterally. All European military forces move to higher states of alert as a precaution. In the meantime, the massive North Korean invasion of the south has bypassed and cut off the strong defenses surrounding Seoul and is pushing the Republic of Korea Army and the U.S. Eighth Army southward to Pusan in a replay of the late summer of 1950. Since Korea is not receiving its planned augmentation--naval forces have either been destroyed or are committed to Southwest Asia, while ground and air forces based in the continental U.S. are moving to Europe--the U.S. NCA feels it has no alternative and uses tactical nuclear weapons against North Korean forces in the Kaesong and Chorwon corridors.

The Soviet leadership decides that the pattern of American behavior up to this point--first use of nuclear weapons in Iran, higher alert rates and dispersal of nuclear weapons in Europe in the face of strong European protests, expansion of the war to sea, direct nuclear attacks on the Soviet homeland, and now nuclear use in Korea--are all signs of a reckless US leadership virtually out of control. In addition, they

American escalation; and that they are in any event close to achieving their original invasion objectives. The Soviets launch selected nuclear strikes with Backfire bombers against the U.S. carrier battle groups concentrating in the Persian Gulf.

At this point, significant developments begin to take place in other theaters all over the globe. U.S. and Western European leaders take a number of precautionary moves against lateral escalation: NATO forces are put on a higher state of alert; mobile theater weapons like Pershing IIs and ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) are deployed out of their cantonment areas; ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), including those of Britain and France, put to sea. Popular European and Japanese opposition to U.S. military moves in the Gulf, strong to begin with, bursts into outright violence as groups take to the streets protesting any cooperation with U.S. aggression. Finally, the North Korean regime sees U.S. preoccupation in Southwest Asia as the opportunity it has long been patiently waiting for, and launches a full-scale ground invasion of the south with the immediate objective of taking Seoul.

The United States is stunned by the attack on its naval forces and by the sudden escalation of the conflict to Asia. The standard plan for the defense of Korea cannot be executed because of combat losses and the disruption of mobilization assets and plans by the conflict in Southwest Asia. Since the only U.S. forces capable of responding to the continuing Soviet advance in Iran are Air Force units in eastern Turkey, the United States persuades the Turkish government to permit it to launch a further series of selective tactical nuclear strikes against Soviet forces, and against the airbases from which bomber strikes originated in the Soviet Union itself. This is the first point at which the homeland of either power has been touched.

At the same time, the war expands at sea. After the loss of two carrier battle groups, remaining U.S. naval commanders in the Indian Ocean, fearing further Soviet preemption, begin "defensive" conventional strikes against the Soviet naval task forces deployed near their own units. Since the Soviets have already attacked U.S. naval forces in the area, this step is taken on the basis of standard operating procedures, without specific authority from the U.S. NCA. Because it seems that

contingency basing plans refuse to permit precautionary U.S. Air Force deployments before the actual Soviet crossing of the border; once it occurs, they are thrown into such a state of panic that they seek to propitiate the Soviets by continuing to refuse access to the United States. This means that air interdiction can be mounted only from bases in Turkey, by B-52s operating out of Egypt and B-1Bs from the continental United States, and from the carrier battle groups concentrating just south of the Straits of Hormuz. A second problem is that the United States can find no one in legal authority in Iran who will issue an invitation for U.S. forces to intervene; in fact, the provisional Islamic government still in power in the southern provinces denounces both superpowers and states that an American intervention would be opposed by force.

Soviet columns advance into Iran quickly along the six major axes in northern Iran and from Afghanistan, meeting minimal resistance from Iranian forces. The U.S. National Command Authority (NCA) decides to interdict them with conventional airstrikes while they are still in the constricted Elburz passes, but without access to land bases in the Gulf finds it impossible to launch a sufficient volume of sorties. Ground forces could be deployed in southern Iran only after a prolonged and costly amphibious landing along the Persian Gulf coast. Thus the president reluctantly decides to accept the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) recommendation to launch a limited tactical nuclear strike against selected choke points in northern Iran with B-52s operating out of Egypt.

The decision to use nuclear weapons is governed by two considerations: first, it is believed that the limited use of five or six weapons will in itself impose significant delays on the Soviet advance; but more importantly, the U.S. NCA hopes that this demonstration of resolve will force the Soviets to stop and reconsider their invasion before reaching the southern oil fields.

The strike is successful in slowing the Soviet advance and causes several thousand Soviet casualties. The Soviet leadership decides not to back down, however, arguing that the Soviet Union will look weak if American first-use is not met with a response in kind; that mounting domestic pressure in the United States and Europe will prevent further

### Scenario 1: Soviet Invasion of Iran

Following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini and a power struggle among the senior ayatollahs, leftist groups that have been patiently building their cadre strength underground and abroad see their opportunity and stage a coup d'etat in the capital. Within a few months the new government in Teheran declares Iran a People's Republic, signs a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union, and receives Soviet advisors and military equipment. The professional army, seeing the total breakdown of political order throughout the country, decides to take matters into its own hands and with significant popular support in the countryside marches to overthrow the new government in Teheran. In the face of the army's successful advance, the leftist government in a panic calls on the Soviet Union for "fraternal" assistance.

The Soviet leadership decides to stage a massive intervention in the northern half of the country with approximately twenty of the thirty divisions stationed in the Transcaucasus, North Caucasus, and Turkestan Military Districts, as well as by the Group of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan. The initial objective is occupation of the country down to a line running through Hamadan, Qazvin, Teheran, and Mashhad. By consensus the primary objective is the preservation in power of the pro-Soviet government, much as it was in Afghanistan in 1979, but a powerful faction within the leadership argues that Iran presents an opportunity of historic proportions for the Soviet Union to seize a significant portion of the oil reserves of the Persian Gulf and deal a decisive setback to the United States before the latter has a chance to complete its long-term defense modernization plans. In this way Western Europe and Japan can be split apart from the United States once and for all, it is argued, at much smaller cost and risk than by a frontal offensive in central Europe. Hence military plans are made to seize not only the oilfields in southern Iran, but in Kuwait and parts of southern Iraq and northern Saudi Arabia as well.

Warned of a massive Soviet intervention, the United States puts into motion its elaborate plans for the deployment of Central Command forces to the Persian Gulf. Along the way, however, some unforeseen problems arise. The Gulf states with which the United States has

of warning. The Soviet Union, by contrast, has roughly thirty divisions and their accompanying air armies in the three military districts bordering on Iran.<sup>13</sup> Such a situation puts great pressure on the United States to commit forces early and to escalate for lack of better conventional options. Another factor is the nature of the terrain in the combat theater. Iran is traversed from east to west by two mountain massifs, the Elburz and the Zagros, which constrict military operations from the Soviet Union to six major axes of advance.<sup>14</sup> In the even of a Soviet invasion of Iran, there would be strong U.S. incentives to hit Soviet columns early with either conventional airstrikes or tactical nuclear weapons while Soviet forces are still moving through the mountainous and constricted terrain of the Elburz. Finally, characteristics of specific weapons systems (e.g., the vulnerability of naval forces relative to ground forces) may invite preemption or accidental attack.

#### ROUTES TO NUCLEAR WAR

There are a number of all too plausible ways in which conventional war could break out between the United States and the Soviet Union in the Middle East/Persian Gulf, and in which nuclear weapons could be first used in a theater context. It is perhaps a bit more difficult to imagine how escalation would proceed from first use in the region to a major nuclear war involving homeland attacks against cities. -- perhaps because this territory is (fortunately) less well charted in our actual experience -- but plausible escalation scenarios can be developed. Obviously, any of the scenarios presented below could develop in a variety of unpredictable ways, or conflict could follow a course entirely unforeseen at present. These scenarios are not intended to be predictions of future events, but illustrations of plausible ways in which escalation could occur, given the current situation in the region.

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<sup>13</sup> While current U.S. plans call for the insertion of a battalion-sized force into the Gulf within hours of a decision to intervene, it will take upward of thirty days, depending on circumstances, to move a single division to Iran.

<sup>14</sup> *Soviet Command Study*, pp. 116, 126, 159, 193, 211.



In addition to local political conflicts, precipitating causes might include a number of specifically military factors. Weapons by themselves do not cause wars, which can be fought at any level of armament, but certain military factors can increase the likelihood of war, or the likelihood of escalation to nuclear weapons once conventional conflict has broken out.

The first and most obvious consideration is conventional military deterrence in the subtheaters of the region. The probability of war will generally be lower where the state favoring continuation of the status quo (in this case, the United States) has a preponderance of conventional military capabilities. The most dangerous situations are likely to be those in which the status quo power finds its conventional options limited and is tempted to compensate either by escalation to nuclear weapons or through expansion of conventional conflict outside the theater. Force imbalances between rival regional powers can also encourage attack, as in the case of Iran, whose apparent weakness and internal disarray was one factor prompting the Iraqi attack in 1980. Superpower clients that find themselves losing wars are usually quick to call upon their patrons for intervention, as the Arabs have done in each of their wars with Israel. Finally, many states in the Middle East have substantial military organizations that themselves invite, limit, or otherwise affect the superpower's use of force.

A second category of military considerations concerns special incentives for preemptive or early use of force by the superpowers. The most unstable situations are those in which technical military considerations dictate prompt resort to either conventional or nuclear weapons by the superpowers, thereby shortening time for both internal decision making and negotiation. Incentives for early use arise from a variety of conditions. As noted above, asymmetries in the overall balance of superpower and local forces may prompt one side to preemption or tactical surprise as a means of redressing the balance. Such is the case in the Persian Gulf, where the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), established in response to the events of the late 1970s as a rapid intervention force to protect U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf, has no forces permanently based in the theater and must deploy them on receipt

### Precipitating Causes

The precipitating causes of war include local political conflicts that could trigger superpower confrontation. These conflicts must be (1) inherently plausible and (2) must affect superpower interests, as defined above, seriously enough to provoke direct intervention with combat forces. It is evident that there are all too many local conflicts in the Middle East meeting the first criterion; those meeting the second, however, limit the set considerably.

Superpower conflict could arise in the Middle East/Persian Gulf without a precipitating local conflict. The Soviet Union, for example, could decide to invade Iran in the context of a war with the United States that started in Europe. Alternatively, it could undertake a similar step as the first move in such a war, or as a means of gaining decisive political leverage over the West. The first of these possibilities is a real one, but outside the scope of our present analysis, which focuses on how war could originate in the Middle East itself. The second is a rather unlikely event. Few attacks come completely out of the blue, without some precipitating local cause; even the German invasion of Poland in 1939 came against the background of Polish-German ethnic conflict in Danzig.

This chapter focuses on two chief scenarios for local political conflict escalating into nuclear war: a Soviet intervention in Iran and an escalation of an Arab-Israeli war. These choices do not require elaborate justification: in the past, both the United States and the Soviet Union have contemplated, threatened, and on occasion carried out interventions in both subtheaters, resulting in crises that raised the possibility of wider war. The problem is rather how to exclude other potential scenarios: the character of Middle Eastern politics is such that new precipitating conflicts could arise virtually overnight. In early 1978, for example, no one was predicting that Soviet troops would be fighting in Afghanistan and that a fundamentalist regime in Iran would be at war with Iraq within two years. The most dangerous superpower confrontations can occur over the least expected developments, which are problematic precisely because they were unanticipated.

Moscow's caution also reflects the overall U.S.-Soviet military balance, and the relative ability of the superpowers to project forces into the theater. Haykal reports another interesting conversation between the Soviets and their Arab clients: when asked by Syrian President Shukri al-Kuwatly to intervene on behalf of Egypt during the Suez crisis, Soviet Defense Minister Marshal Zhukov

produced a map of the Middle East and spread it on the table. Then, turning to Kuwatly, he said, "How can we go to the aid of Egypt? Tell me! Are we supposed to send our armies through Turkey, Iran, and then into Syria and Iraq and on into Israel and so eventually attack the British and French forces?"<sup>12</sup>

By the early '70s the situation had changed considerably. The Soviet Union had not only achieved a position of rough strategic parity with the United States, but had acquired substantial projection forces, including permanent Mediterranean and Indian Ocean naval squadrons, seven airborne divisions, and airlift capabilities.

We have no direct evidence of the Soviet leadership's present-day subjective evaluation of either the relative stakes in the Persian Gulf or the current military balance. While they probably recognize the strength of the Western stake in oil, they may well feel that the gains of the Iranian Revolution are in some sense permanent. In 1974 Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko stated that "there is no question that cannot be settled without the participation of the Soviet Union;" with the broad growth of Soviet military power over the past two decades, however, the Soviets may feel that they can no longer tolerate developments such as another pro-American regime in Teheran that would try to reestablish the former status quo, with U.S. military facilities and access close to their borders. The long-term Soviet force modernization effort over the past two decades has obviously also increased Moscow's self-confidence, as its interventions in the third world between 1975 and 1980 indicate. It is precisely such situations in which subjective evaluations of relative stakes are uncertain and the force balance has shifted away from American predominance, that pose the greatest dangers for superpower conflict.

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<sup>12</sup> Mohammed Haykal (1978), p. 71.

Arab-Israeli theater, Moscow has repeatedly allowed its clients to suffer humiliating setbacks at the hands of Israel, usually at great cost to Soviet prestige in the Arab world, without intervening on their behalf. The most blatant case of Soviet nonsupport was the June 1967 War, when Egypt, Moscow's oldest and perhaps most important third world client, was routed militarily and stripped of the Sinai.<sup>10</sup> When the Soviets have threatened to intervene in an Arab-Israeli war, it has always been after the peak of the crisis had passed and it was relatively clear that their threat would not have to be carried out. While the Soviets dispatched twenty thousand air defense troops to Egypt in 1970 and another six thousand to Syria in 1982, it was fairly clear in both cases that their intervention would not provoke a direct U.S. military response; when such a response has occurred, the Soviets have backed down.

There appear to be two reasons for this historical pattern of Soviet caution. First, while the balance of superpower stakes may seem to be comparable, the Soviets appear to have tacitly recognized the superiority of the American interest throughout most of the postwar period, particularly its interest in oil. For example, Mohammed Haykal reports that in the midst of the 1958 Lebanese-Iraqi crisis Khrushchev told Nasser:

I want you to know what Eden told me and Bulganin when we were in London in 1956. Eden said that if he saw a threat to Britain's oil supplies in the Middle East he would fight. He was talking quite seriously, and what has just happened [i.e., the Anglo-American intervention in Jordan and Lebanon] shows this... Now, the revolution in Iraq is a threat to that oil. I don't know anything about the new leaders in Iraq, but it is most important that they should reassure the West that its supplies of oil will not be interrupted.<sup>11</sup>

Persian Gulf oil, it should be noted, was much less critical to OECD economies then than now.

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<sup>10</sup> As recently as the Lebanon War of 1982, Moscow failed to take military action on behalf of Syria when its forces in Lebanon were defeated by Israel.

<sup>11</sup> Mohammed Haykal, *The Sphinx and the Commissar: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Middle East* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 98.

First, it is all too easy to imagine ways in which direct conventional conflict between the superpowers can begin in the region. It is somewhat harder, though certainly not impossible, to imagine how nuclear weapons might first be used in a limited way, either against regional actors or against superpower forces deployed in the area. The most implausible elements of both the Iranian and Arab-Israeli scenarios concern how conflict escalates from this level to large-scale strikes on the superpower homelands. In this respect the Middle East is the opposite of Europe, where it is easy to imagine a conventional NATO-Warsaw Pact conflict turning into a nuclear war, but very difficult to understand how that conventional conflict would get started in the first place.

Second, to account for these implausible escalation thresholds, both scenarios require a serious misunderstanding or miscalculation on the part of one or both superpowers. In the Iranian scenario, for example, a Soviet decision to preempt is based on the belief that a large-scale U.S. nuclear attack is imminent.

Third, alerts or higher states of force readiness, used either in a precautionary way or as signals, are one important way in which the crisis can escalate laterally out of the Middle East/Persian Gulf region.

Fourth, naval forces play a similarly important role in globalizing regional conflicts. This is because: (1) naval forces are the easiest to deploy in regional conflicts, where they either become instruments of intervention or targets; (2) to have naval combatants in close proximity with one another is destabilizing in a crisis because the general rule in naval warfare is that whoever shoots first wins; and (3) war at sea, once begun, is very difficult to contain geographically.

Fifth, escalation to homeland strikes is relatively more plausible in the context of multiple simultaneous conflicts in different geographical theaters--for example, a Persian Gulf crisis plus a Korean conflict plus mobilization in Europe plus war at sea, and so on.

It is important to note that preventing nuclear war is not the sole objective of U.S. foreign policy; rather the problem is to lower the risks of U.S.-Soviet war while preserving U.S. interests in the Middle

East/Persian Gulf region. Although the nuclear war scenarios described above are possible, they are highly unlikely, and cannot be the basis of day-to-day policy. Excessive fear of nuclear war or too great a policy emphasis on avoiding the risk of war can lead to disastrous consequences for American interests and allies in the short run; in the long run overemphasis on war avoidance may lead to miscalculations on the part of adversaries that would have the ironic result of making war more likely. To take an extreme example, one could lower the risk of nuclear war with the Soviets over the Persian Gulf to practically zero by deciding ahead of time that no developments there, including a Soviet invasion of Iran, merited American military intervention. Such a policy, however, would raise the probability of conventional aggression by removing deterrents to Soviet action. This could in turn lead to further aggression in other theaters where the United States would feel compelled to resort to nuclear weapons; alternatively, since the United States would never be able to renounce its interests in the Gulf altogether, it might undertake panicked and desperate measures to redress the military imbalance at the last moment. It goes without saying that the United States can also increase the chances of nuclear war by defining its interests too expansively as well, such as when U.S. forces provoked Chinese intervention in Korea by driving too close to the Yalu River in 1950. The issue for policy is to find an appropriate definition of interests that is neither too broad nor too narrow.

Bearing these considerations in mind, we will discuss four categories of actions that can be taken to lower the risk of nuclear war in the Middle East/Persian Gulf: (1) doctrine and policy; (2) forces; (3) procedures; and (4) cooperative measures.

### **Doctrine and Policy**

Because it is so easy to see how local conflicts might lead to conventional superpower intervention and war in the Middle East/Persian Gulf, the most obvious policy-related actions the United States could undertake are efforts to prevent these conflicts from arising in the first place. The history of peacemaking in the Middle East is a long and troubled one, with many failures and several important successes. Unfortunately, not all of the region's conflicts are susceptible to

negotiated settlement, and in particular, to settlement through U.S. mediation. The United States has virtually no influence over developments in the Gulf such as the Iran-Iraq war or an internal power struggle in Iran. Indeed, we should recognize that in suggesting policies to settle conflicts in the Middle East/Persian Gulf, we are talking primarily about the Arab-Israeli conflict, where the United States has in fact played a constructive role in the past. Attempts to inject the United States into situations where it has little leverage can be damaging by undermining U.S. prestige and drawing the nation into unwanted involvements--the most recent example being Lebanon in 1982-84.

Successive U.S. administrations have concluded that the negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute is a highly desirable goal, and not simply because of the risk of nuclear war. But while a broad consensus exists on ends, there is considerable disagreement on means (e.g., comprehensive v. piecemeal solutions, territorial compromises, inclusion of the Soviet Union, and so on). It is not clear whether a truly comprehensive settlement is possible any longer, given the pace of Israeli West Bank settlement activity and the limitations of Arab leadership arguably evident in their reaction to the 1982 Reagan peace plan. In any event, this approach has several important limitations.

First, many political negotiations can achieve results only in conjunction with threats or the actual use of force. One can argue that peace between Egypt and Israel was possible only as a result of the October War, which gave Egypt the self-confidence needed to proceed with a separate peace and gave Israel a powerful incentive to make territorial concessions. Diplomacy that ignores the underlying realities of power politics is doomed to failure; in particular, such progress as has been made to date on the Arab-Israeli conflict has been underwritten in large measure by America's strong military support for Israel. Needless to say, the acceptance of a certain level of conflict in the short run can get out of hand and work at cross purposes to the long term goal of peace.

Second, negotiations frequently serve as a means of advancing particular political interests and do not in themselves necessarily lead to greater stability in the long run. The specific content of a negotiated settlement is more important than the fact of negotiations.

Many Israelis have argued that "resolution" of the Arab-Israeli dispute through the creation of a West Bank Palestinian state could lead to a situation more unstable than the current one, by creating an irredentist threat to both Israel and Jordan, and might moreover increase Israeli reliance on nuclear weapons. Arab critics have similarly charged that the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty freed Israel to take military action against Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon.

Third, the inclusion of the Soviet Union in Arab-Israeli negotiations, while superficially attractive, can have highly counterproductive results, because of the fundamental asymmetry of U.S. and Soviet interests noted earlier. To a much greater extent than is true for the United States, Soviet influence in the Middle East depends on the existence of a certain level of conflict; while Moscow has clearly wanted to mitigate the dangers of conflict in the past, a thoroughgoing political settlement would not serve its long-term interests. Granting the Soviets a coequal role, as in the abortive 1974 Geneva Conference, is likely to be a formula for deadlock and rules out other less ambitious but more practicable solutions.

The United States can of course engage in efforts to achieve local political settlements as one means of reducing the risk of nuclear war. The Arab-Israeli peace process will inevitably depend very much on tactical considerations like the character of the Israeli government, internal politics in the PLO, inter-Arab relations, and so on. The most fruitful approach is likely to be an incremental one, like the Camp David process, which has significantly lowered, at least for the intermediate future, the probability of another Arab-Israeli war on the scale of 1973 with all its attendant risks of superpower confrontation. In the absence of striking new developments such as the emergence of another Sadat, the most that one can hope for is probably a regulation of the conflict, rather than its final resolution. Controlling the number of participants, the types of weapons and the scope and intensity of future Arab-Israeli wars is not an insignificant aim in view of the objective of reducing the risks of nuclear war.



A second important type of policy the United States can undertake is the clear communication of its interests in the region. Although the Soviet Union has generally recognized and respected the strength of U.S. and Western interests in both the Persian Gulf and Arab-Israeli theaters, one cannot take such forbearance for granted. Stakes are built on objective political and economic interests, and are communicated in the long run by clear statements of purpose. If the United States is indeed prepared to fight for oil, then authoritative pronouncements like the Carter Doctrine or formal defense commitments spelling this out are all to the good. Moreover, rhetorical positions must be backed by concrete measures such as military capabilities to defend them, and the demonstration of national will to use those capabilities when necessary. In the short run, it is important that U.S. political leaders reinforce these long-term commitments during a crisis with clear-cut statements of what they will and will not tolerate.

The real difficulty lies in laying down red lines while avoiding overcommitment, a problem that has plagued U.S. postwar foreign policy. The Middle East/Persian Gulf differs from Europe in that U.S. interests and stakes have changed over time and are much less well defined: most Americans will better understand the need to defend West Germany, which will want our support, than Iran, which may not. The American public and Congress have swung from support of Dulles-era pactomania to an extreme reluctance to use force in support of overseas interests. In the present post-Vietnam and post-Lebanon mood, it is not clear that a national consensus exists for even as clear-cut a strategic interest as the defense of oil, much less for related objectives like the defense of the territorial integrity of Israel or Pakistan. (A formal commitment to the state of Israel will also involve significant costs to the United States in terms of its relations with other Arab states, and may affect its ability to defend its interests in the Gulf.) Attempts to communicate fundamental interests are frequently indistinguishable from threats, which tend to scare people, as in the case of the nuclear alert at the end of the October 1973 War, for which Kissinger and Nixon were severely criticized in some circles. Ultimately, there is no simple

solution to these problems: leaders must be prudent in defining national interests and must take the time to explain the reasons for that definition to the American people.

### Forces

With respect to the Persian Gulf theater, the first and most important policy to reduce the risk of nuclear war is the creation of a conventional deterrent to Soviet intervention. As we have seen, the logistical problems in projecting forces to the Gulf create powerful incentives for rapid U.S. escalatory decisions and may push Washington to a decision to use nuclear weapons. A stronger conventional deterrent will make Soviet action less likely and, if deterrence breaks down, buy time to permit a defusing of the crisis through diplomatic means.

It can be argued that a weak deterrent is worse than no deterrent at all, since it will be insufficient to deter a Soviet intervention in the first place but large enough to involve the United States automatically in a war it cannot win. One can argue further that since geographical realities make *any* U.S. effort to defend Iran against Soviet invasion inadequate, the existence of CENTCOM is itself an invitation to disaster.

It is true that even under the most optimistic assumptions about U.S. ability to build adequate forces and deploy them to the Gulf in a crisis, it is highly unlikely that the United States would be able to defend Iran against a fully determined Soviet invasion. Successful deterrence does not, however, necessarily rest on the ability to prevail should deterrence fail, but rather on the ability to impose costs on one's adversary that are enough to outweigh any potential gains.<sup>15</sup> As we have seen, the Soviets have behaved cautiously in this region in the past. The risk of direct combat with U.S. forces, even if ultimately successful, is not something Moscow would undertake lightly, particularly in a secondary theater. It is not unreasonable to expect that the sort of Rapid Deployment Force that can be built under existing budgetary and political constraints will succeed in deterring Soviet intervention.

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<sup>15</sup> It has never been clear that NATO could mount a successful defense of western Europe, which does not mean that it lacks deterrent effect.

Several steps can be taken to improve the Persian Gulf deterrent. The first is the procurement of additional support and mobility forces to move and sustain CENTCOM in the Gulf, including increased strategic and theater airlift, kits to allow aircraft to operate out of unimproved airfields, ammunition and spare parts stocks, and the like. These forces are traditionally shortchanged in military procurement and are more critical in the short run than additional units.

The second step is the improvement of U.S. basing structure in the Gulf. An overt U.S. presence obviously runs the risk of provoking nationalist resentment and leading to the sorts of instability to which CENTCOM was supposed to respond; but there are many much less visible steps that can be taken short of this, such as joint strategic planning, prestocking of logistics, and so on.<sup>16</sup>

A third step is the creation of lighter Army divisions that can be moved to the Gulf more rapidly than a standard mechanized division. Some have questioned whether the Army, which currently plans to create two new light divisions, is trading off too much firepower for increased mobility, given that these forces would have to face Soviet motorized rifle divisions in a conflict in Iran. The concept is nonetheless a sound one: speed will be critical if the United States is to create a defensive line in southern Iran and present the Soviets with a choice of whether or not to attack; heavy mechanized or armored forces are in any event not appropriate to the terrain in the Zagros.

A fourth and more expensive step would be the simple expansion of the number of units available for intervention in the Gulf. Currently, CENTCOM has no forces of its own; in a crisis, units must be stripped from other theaters, weakening the deterrent in Europe and the Far East. This is acceptable as long as the United States faces an isolated

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<sup>16</sup> In addition, Israel could prove to be a highly useful ally in the event of a Gulf crisis, given its military capabilities, stability, and commonality of weapons systems with U.S. forces. In peacetime, any hint of U.S.-Israeli strategic cooperation will have negative repercussions for U.S. dealings with the Arab states, but these have perhaps been exaggerated: during the 1970 Jordanian crisis King Hussein was willing to accept Israeli military help when his throne depended on it, and a similar calculation is likely to affect the thinking of the conservative states of the Gulf in a severe crisis.

Persian Gulf contingency, but would require sequencing of operations in the event of simultaneous conflicts in multiple theaters, or an abandonment of the Persian Gulf altogether. U.S. plans for the reinforcement of Europe would become hopelessly snarled if the Soviets preceded an offensive against NATO with a diversionary attack in the Persian Gulf.

A final step that could be taken is heavier U.S. reliance on the threat of theater nuclear weapons to deter Soviet intervention in the Gulf. In many respects the considerations regarding this tradeoff are no different from those that apply in Europe: on the one hand, one could argue that the best means of deterring nuclear war is to deter war per se, to which the threat (though not necessarily the actual use) of nuclear weapons would contribute; on the other hand, given Soviet conventional advantages in the theater, nuclear weapons may prove to be the only means of deterring them and actually stopping a Soviet advance if deterrence fails. U.S. stakes in the Persian Gulf are lower overall than in Europe, however, and there is some question whether the United States would want to initiate nuclear use in a peripheral theater. In either case, it is important that nuclear weapons not become a substitute for serious conventional options.

### Procedures

Since it will not be possible to avoid superpower crises over local conflicts in the Middle East/Persian Gulf altogether, it is important to be able to manage crises and prevent escalation once they have begun. Obviously, many general crisis management measures--such as improved technical means of communication between the United States and Soviet Union, summits, the introduction of pauses--are not specific to any one geographical region and will contribute to escalation control in the Middle East/Persian Gulf as well as elsewhere. There are, however, some measures that are of particular relevance to this region.

As noted earlier, it is particularly difficult to imagine how one might cross the threshold that divides regional conflict from global nuclear war. Alerts and naval forces are two important avenues by which regional crises can become globalized, with misinterpretation playing a major role in each case. This suggests that greater attention must be paid to both these issues.

Alerts have been used both as a precaution against unforeseen developments and as a deliberate signal of determination, as in the October War. In the latter case, U.S. strategic forces were placed at a higher state of readiness worldwide precisely to convey seriousness of purpose. While the message was correctly interpreted in this case, a similar step in a future crisis might be misread as indicating an intent to widen the conflict. Different types of alerts can change standard operating procedures and rules of engagement in ways that could have unexpected results in areas quite remote from the regional conflict that sparked them. It would appear that U.S. national leaders, particularly those outside the military, have a very imprecise notion of what different alert levels entail, much less how they might be interpreted by the other side. For example, by former Secretary of State Haig's account, Secretary of Defense Weinberger raised the alert status of U.S. forces on the day President Reagan was shot without knowing whether this move affected U.S. strategic forces. One simple measure that might be taken is simply to brief national leaders thoroughly on the effects of alerts and, perhaps, historical precedents for their use. Moreover, since different alert levels can be set for each of the individual unified and specified commands, it may be desirable to alert only those forces in the region itself.

Naval forces present special problems because they are likely to be deployed early into a Middle East/Persian Gulf crisis, and constitute vulnerable, high-value targets in the event of war. Naval warfare introduces a destabilizing element into regional conflicts by putting a premium on preemption, a situation aggravated by the U.S. and Soviet navies' practice of staging realistic maneuvers and exercises which might be taken for the real thing in a crisis. Standard naval operating procedures, which in some cases permit individual commanders to initiate conflict on their own authority in self-defense, could be a source of accidental escalation. While national political authorities should not unduly restrict a unified theater commander's ability to protect his forces, standard operating procedures need to be reviewed and put under strict control, particularly in the early phases of a crisis. It might be desirable to consider ways in which naval forces

could be disengaged in a crisis so as to separate them from enemy forces, or to employ them in such a manner that naval engagements, once begun, do not automatically spread to other parts of the world.

Planning for the possibility of multiple simultaneous conflicts in geographically remote theaters and improvements in the worldwide command and control of U.S. forces will be important if the United States becomes involved in a major regional crisis, which can have unexpected lateral spillover effects. For example, allocating forces from the western Pacific to the Persian Gulf would have a major impact on the Korean balance and might encourage instability there to which U.S. forces would have difficulty responding (indeed, the two phenomena are related). Multiple crises are perhaps more probable than isolated ones, since the temptation will exist to take advantage of superpower preoccupation in one particular area (witness Suez and Hungary in 1956). Moreover, a series of crises may make direct superpower homeland attacks more likely, as in the scenario described earlier. While the solution to this problem may lie more in force structure than procedures (i.e., larger, more mobile, and more flexible forces), it is important for the United States to think through ahead of time how it would interpret and react to simultaneous regional crises.

In the end, however, procedures are likely to be much less important for crisis management than simple political judgment and the exercise of statesmanship. Though technical and institutional approaches to political decision making are currently fashionable, careful study of past crises in the Middle East (indeed crises anywhere) reveals that the single most important factor influencing their outcomes is political prudence on the part of national leaders. In previous Middle Eastern crises Soviet intervention has been successfully deterred by the timely communication, through both political and military means, of U.S. willingness to defend certain interests, balanced by a healthy respect for certain core Soviet interests. The Soviets have engaged in a policy of deliberate bluff in past crises, backing down in the face of strong U.S. pressure out of a respect for the strength of Western power and interest relative to its own. The lack of the Soviet military options, particularly vis-à-vis Israel, suggests that the United States could probably have pushed Moscow even further than it did at several

points in the past. Yet U.S. leaders have exercised a healthy caution in not seeking further marginal advantages that might drive the Soviets to extreme actions. Indeed, in many situations the best way of preventing war is to know when to back down, even at the expense of an ally's or one's own short term interests.

Statesmanship is the art of knowing how to be moderate without seeming weak, distinguishing between bluff and serious threat, and correctly interpreting motives behind an enemy's behavior. Such judgments are highly dependent on context and are not arrived at by a mechanical process; they are instead the product of experience, intuition, and a certain kind of political wisdom that can be learned but not taught. While institutional mechanisms can assist in the collection of information and in improving communications, the content of what is communicated remains the province of the statesman and is by far the dominant factor determining a crisis outcome.

A nation obviously cannot produce statesmen on demand as a matter of national policy. It would be a mistake, however, to see the problem simply in terms of policy mechanisms rather than as one of education. Universities and other institutions of higher learning are frequently tempted to play a prominent role as counsellors to princes, but they should not lose sight of their traditional role as educators of princes as well. My own view is that traditional curricula, like like the thorough study of history, are better suited to producing statesmen than are such trendier approaches such as psychologically based theories of political behavior. Needless to say, in an area like the Middle East/Persian Gulf, one needs people who are well versed in its politics and history.

### **Cooperative Measures**

Various cooperative measures between the United States and the Soviet Union have been proposed for the Middle East/Persian Gulf, including understandings on spheres of interest, Indian Ocean arms control, and conventional arms transfer talks, in addition the proposal to include the Soviet Union in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Unfortunately, none of these approaches is likely to be very fruitful.

Informal understandings between the United States and the Soviet Union on spheres of influence--or perhaps spheres of restraint, in which only more threatening types of involvement would be ruled out--are not in themselves bad ideas and have been practiced to some extent in Europe. There are several practical obstacles that would prevent the resurrection of anything like the 1907 Anglo-Russian entente, which divided Iran into Russian, British, and neutral zones, however. The first is that the countries of the region are no longer the passive prizes of great power diplomacy that they were during the period of European colonial dominance; rather they can exercise considerable leverage to prevent the superpowers from making deals affecting their interests behind their backs. (For example, Egypt, fearing that the United States and Soviet Union had agreed to freeze the territorial status quo in the Middle East at the May 1972 summit, succeeded in dragging Moscow into support for the October War.) On the American side, moreover, there would be considerable resistance on principle to the moral cynicism implied by bargaining over spheres of influence. Such understandings, to be workable, would have to be arrived at informally and very quietly by statesmen on both sides.

The primary problem with Indian Ocean arms control is that it imposes disproportionate constraints on American military options in the Persian Gulf, given that the United States must rely heavily on seapower to balance Soviet ground forces in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Such an agreement would be of greatest benefit to India, which would emerge as the hegemonial power in the region; this explains New Delhi's consistent support for the idea. A broader Southwest Asian security agreement that would limit internal Soviet deployments along its southern borders would be somewhat more equitable, but highly impracticable under almost any foreseeable circumstances. Not only are great powers reluctant to limit forces on their own territory, but they would be reintroduced rapidly in a crisis.

Conventional arms transfer limitations present numerous technical difficulties of measurement and comparability; many states in the Middle East/Persian Gulf like Jordan and Iraq are involved not in bilateral but tri- or quadrilateral arms races that would require multilateral



controls on a host of recipient and supplier states. The more important problem is that conventional arms transfer talks address symptoms rather than causes. The United States and the Soviet Union can engage in long-term negotiations over strategic arms or conventional forces in Europe because they are not preoccupied with a host of immediate territorial, ethnic, and religious disputes; in the Middle East, these more fundamental issues would quickly overwhelm attempts to regulate arms supply. A more sensible approach would be to address these underlying political differences directly--a hard enough task--after which technical agreements limiting military arsenals would become much more feasible.

Cooperative measures might prove quite useful in regulating the interaction of naval forces. In recognition of the destabilizing potential of peacetime navies, the United States and Soviet Union signed an Incidents-at-Sea agreement as part of their broader detente in the early 1970s. These measures could be updated and extended to include such things as prohibition of the locking-on of fire control radars or of forcing submarines to surface during a crisis, separation of naval forces, and so on.

Finally, there is the question of the overall atmosphere of U.S.-Soviet relations. It is important to recognize that friendly talk between Washington and Moscow will make regional crises substantially less dangerous. The most serious Middle Eastern crisis in recent times, involving threats of intervention and nuclear war, occurred in the fall of 1973 at the height of detente. The first three years of the Reagan administration, by contrast, have seen a steady deterioration in the tone of U.S.-Soviet relations but the absence of significant Soviet adventurism. The difference between the two was due almost entirely to the presence or absence of local opportunities for superpower involvement, of course, rather than atmospherics. If one's expectations are kept suitably modest, however, good overall U.S.-Soviet relations may facilitate superpower control over regional crises. Henry Kissinger has argued that the existence of detente made the 1973 crisis less severe than it might otherwise have been by creating certain channels of communication. If the U.S. and Soviet Union are to avoid nuclear war, even marginally improved communication is bound to be a good thing.

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